



# THE GULF MOMENT: ARAB RELATIONS SINCE 2011

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Florence Gaub



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**THE GULF MOMENT:  
ARAB RELATIONS SINCE 2011**

**Florence Gaub**

**May 2015**

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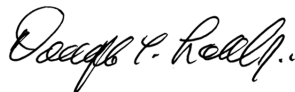
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## FOREWORD

What began in 2011 as a series of demonstrations against domestic circumstances has since evolved into a decidedly regional and therefore strategic matter. The changing of regimes in Tunis, Cairo, and Tripoli has also changed the way Arab leaders engage with each other, and the way the region as a whole orchestrates its interstate relations. Often overlooked during debates about what began 4 years ago, the Arab Spring has spilled over from the national to the regional level, paralyzing some traditionally strong actors while empowering others. As Dr. Florence Gaub writes in this monograph, the region has therefore entered its "Gulf Moment"—a time in its political relations defined no longer by Cairo, Damascus, or Baghdad, but by Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Doha.

For the longest time, the Arab Gulf States were seen as political bystanders in the region, managing rather than shaping events. Now, they have emerged on the regional scene as actors in their own right—not only with the ambition to have a say in how events unfold, but also the financial and military muscle to back it up. The United Arab Emirates has replaced Syria as the second largest Arab air force, and, as events in Libya and Syria have shown, is not afraid to use it.

These new developments need to be taken into account when the United States engages with a region that has changed not only in tactical but also strategic terms. Dr. Gaub explains how.



DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
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## SUMMARY

Within only 4 years, the “Arab Spring” has turned into a regional power play. The regional landscape has shifted not only once or twice but three times in a very short time frame. The first shock to the regional system, which occurred in 2011, removed four decade-old regimes; the second brought Islamism as a political force to the forefront in first Tunisia and later Egypt and Libya; and the third saw the return of revisionist forces following the removal of Egypt’s President Mohamed Morsi from power, the power-sharing agreement in Tunisia, and the persistence of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. With every wave of change at the domestic level, the regional implications of the Arab Spring became more and more pronounced, and, by 2014, visible in military and diplomatic terms.

More emboldened in military terms, more ambitious in diplomatic terms, and less receptive to outside influence, the Arab state system is currently undergoing a reconfiguration unseen since its era of independence. The implosion of some, previously strong, regional actors (such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt) has given way to other players – all of which are now located in the Gulf. In terms of regional relations, the Arab world has therefore entered a Gulf moment, and is likely to remain in it for the time being.

As the region underwent three shocks, Gulf states hedged their bets differently than they had in the beginning – but they also sought to influence events actively to embolden their own positions. Qatar, which made itself an unequivocal supporter of all protests from the very beginning, conducted a consistent policy of interventionism in the years after the Arab Spring. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) moved be-

tween actively supporting regime change at the beginning while containing its most destabilizing effects, whereas Saudi Arabia developed an initially cautious but increasingly aggressive revisionist stance that was as consistent as Qatar's—but both policies were ultimately in a collision course with each other.

The regional geopolitical changes that were set in motion in Tunisia in late-2010 have therefore culminated in a powerful pushback by those powers, which feel threatened by Islamism as an electoral force. More importantly, the rift among Gulf States when it comes to the implications of 2011 are being felt across the region. The antagonism between Islamist forces and Qatar on the one hand, and reactionary forces, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, on the other, has had ripple effects that can be seen in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt. The driving force behind inter-Arab relations has therefore relocated from Cairo, where it was situated for the better part of the 20th century, to the Gulf.

## **THE GULF MOMENT: ARAB RELATIONS SINCE 2011**

Originally, the “Arab Spring” was a domestic affair: it expressed national concerns about social justice and economic conditions in first Tunisia, then Egypt, and later Syria and Yemen. But within only 4 years, it has turned into a regional power play revolving mainly around security concerns—and domestic issues have been almost entirely forgotten. Perhaps more confusingly, the regional landscape has shifted not once or twice but three times in a very short time frame. The first shock to the regional system occurred in 2011, removing 4-decade-old regimes; the second brought Islamism to the forefront as a political force in first Tunisia and later Egypt and Libya; and the third saw the return of revisionist forces following the removal of Egypt’s President Mohamed Morsi from power, the power-sharing agreement in Tunisia, and the persistence of Bashar al-Assad in Syria. With every wave of change at the domestic level, the regional implications of the Arab Spring became more and more pronounced, and, by 2014, visible in military and diplomatic terms.

The alterations the domestic shocks are transmitting to the regional level show a clear geostrategic shift for the region as a whole. More emboldened in military terms, more ambitious in diplomatic terms, and less receptive to outside influence, the Arab state system is currently undergoing a reconfiguration unseen since its era of independence. The implosion of some previously strong regional actors (such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt) has given way to other players—all of which are now located in the Gulf. In terms of regional relations, the Arab world has therefore entered a Gulf moment, and is likely to remain in it for the

time being—although challengers will arise. As shaky alliances of revolutionary and revisionist forces are forming, the former cannot agree about what the future will look like, whereas the latter show no consensus as to what they wish to return. While the two blocks are by no means cohesive, this means that Arab integration, in political or economic terms, is, once again, postponed. A chronically unstable system therefore is projected to remain unstable, but its epicenter has moved to the Gulf.

All of this matters to Western powers, and to the United States in particular. While the region remains of high strategic value (due to its oil reserves and one of the main trade routes running through it), it is also a chronic source of insecurity, be it from terrorism or the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Cooperating with regional powers in defense matters has been a cornerstone of American engagement; for this to remain a viable policy choice, it is important to choose the partners with the right regional clout and anticipate their demands and capabilities to tackle regional challenges. It also means that, when engaging with regional forces, the United States now faces emboldened, empowered, and ambitious counterparts who wish to be treated accordingly.

This monograph seeks to shed light on the evolution of the Arab regional system, to explain its endemic instability, and, most importantly, to forecast what the current situation means for the Western powers and for the United States in particular.

## **The Arab Region: From Idea to Political Space.**

Engagement with the Arab region has been strongly influenced by one of the key features of the region as a latecomer in the international system. When

Europe, North America, and South America were already independent states conducting foreign and regional policies, the Arab world was still almost entirely under non-Arab control at the beginning of the 20th century. In fact, it was not a region in the political sense until the mid-20th century, and developed only successively the notion of a shared political space. As independence arrived in three waves, the region not only struggled to establish sovereignty over its own matters, but also had to come to terms with powerful ideologies threatening the idea of independent Arab states. This means that, as a whole, the region has developed fewer norms to deal with crises, less established sovereignty, and fewer solidified institutions.

The first wave of independence, mainly in the Middle East, concerned states such as Egypt (nominally in 1922, but effectively in 1936), Iraq (1932), Syria (1941), Lebanon (1943), and Transjordan (1946, renamed Jordan in 1952), which had been under the League of Nations' protectorate system following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. These states, along with reborn Saudi Arabia (founded in 1932) and Northern Yemen (founded in 1918)—both of which had never been colonized by Western power—formed the League of Arab States in 1945.

But although the League embodied the idea of an Arab region in that sense, it was not born as a driver of any regional order. In fact, its creation was more the result of a sentiment-turned-ideology prevalent in the region since the early-20th century than the desire to coordinate Arab regional relations. The League's very existence defined the framework for how successive waves of independent Arab states would operate in the coming century.



The League's backbone, pan-Arabism, was therefore what defined the region in the absence of geographic or political unity: Essentially, the idea was that all those speaking the Arabic language and defining themselves as Arabs form a political constituency. The ideology was born in the Arabic-speaking areas under Ottoman control (especially in what is today Syria); written evidence can be traced back to the Hussein-MacMahon correspondence between the Sherif of Mecca and Great Britain's High Commissioner in Egypt at the beginning of World War I. In it, Sherif Hussein asked for the creation of an "Arab" state in return for lending support to Britain's war efforts against the Ottoman Empire. His son, Faisal, went even further at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, declaring that the goal would be "to unite the Arabs eventually into one nation."<sup>1</sup> The project was thwarted by France and Great Britain, however. Faisal's short-lived Arab Kingdom was expelled from Damascus in 1920, and the Asian part of the Arab world was divided into five entities controlled by the Europeans. Nevertheless, dreams of Arab unification survived and re-emerged in the shape of the League.

However, the first attempt at Arab unification not only failed—it was originally incomplete—since it did not include Egypt, or indeed North Africa, in its initial plans. Later attempts would make up for these shortcomings.

The second wave of Arab independence expanded the notion of the Arab world to the region's West. When European (mainly French, but also Italian and Spanish) colonialism came to an end in the 1950s and 1960s, Libya (1951), Morocco (1956), Sudan (1956), Tunisia (1956), Mauritania (1960), and Algeria (1962) came to be independent states. All the second-wave

states joined the Arab League shortly after becoming independent—with the exception of Mauritania, whose independence was not recognized by Morocco until 1969, and whose Arab nature was disputed by Saudi Arabia. Mauritania finally joined in 1973—hence bolstering the notion of a common regional space ranging from North Africa to West Asia.

In a third wave, the smaller Gulf States achieved sovereignty from the United Kingdom (UK), under whose control they had been until then: Kuwait (1961), Bahrain (1971), Qatar (1971), the United Arab Emirates (UAE)(1971), and South Yemen (1967, unified with North Yemen in 1990)—all of which joined the Arab League. This coincided with the exponential production of oil, particularly in Saudi Arabia, whose revenue multiplied from \$4.3 billion in 1973 to \$101.2 billion in 1980.<sup>2</sup> From a desert outback, the Gulf began to emerge as a regional actor in that decade.

At last, Oman joined at the same time as its smaller Gulf neighbors. Palestine, which declared itself to be a state in 1988, in spite of Israeli control of the territory in question, was recognized by the League as a full member the same year. (Its predecessor organization, the Palestinian National Council, had been recognized by the League as the representative of the Palestinian people in 1976).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps crucially, the Arab system as a regional space necessitating an order was born only at this point. Until then, the territories now claimed by several Arab states had been always part of larger constructs, be they Ottoman, European, or indeed, Arab, in the Middle Ages. From a sub-region of another entity, the Arab world moved at last to a region that defined itself as a cultural space with the ambition, but not the capacity, to become one political entity—

an ambition still echoing through the frustrations of political contestations today.

### **From Arab Region to Arab State System.**

The regional system that emerged in the decades following the end of World War II had several features: one was the lack of a hegemon with the capacity to create stability or even integration, and instead comprised several middle powers competing for leadership, including Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East, and Algeria, Morocco, and Libya in North Africa. In fact, only Tunisia, Mauritania, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Kuwait have never displayed regional ambitions. The absence of such a centripetal force is at least in part the result of the region's late-comer status in the international system, meaning that outsiders could easily thwart (and have done so) the creation of an Arab Great Power. The fact that outside states had accomplished their consolidation by the time the Arab world reached independence gave them the latitude and capacity to prevent the ascent of a strong regional state — such as happened in Egypt under Muhammad Ali and Gamal Abdel Nasser.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps more importantly, pan-Arabism (and to some extent pan-Islamism) has questioned the very existence of Arab statehood consistently as a creation of colonialism. The duality of Arab nationhood is reflected in Arabic itself, in which Arab nationalism as a whole is referred to by the word *Qawmiyya* (or sometimes the Islamic term *Umma*), whereas Arab state nationalism is referred to as *Wataniyya*. Before being able to establish a regional state system, Arab states therefore had to come to terms with an ideology that threatened their very existence.

It is important to note that the negation of the Arab state system as such is an ideological move rather than a historically sound one: most Arab states existed as delimited territories before the 19th century or even before (like Egypt and Syria, which sees themselves as the successors of Bilad al-Sham, a 7th-century province of the early Caliphates). "Colonialism affected the boundaries of Arab states, but it did not, with the exception of the Fertile Crescent cases, create those states."<sup>5</sup> The state system as we know it today is therefore not the result of foreign powers (with the exception of Jordan and Iraq, which were indeed created without a preceding notion of state or nationhood), but of pre-existing traits of structure and identity.

That notwithstanding, these states encountered in pan-Arabism a powerful ideological contender. Arab states were born into a threatening scenario of not only regional war, but perhaps more importantly, of internal conflict. Where Arab citizens joined any type of transnational movement—be it communism, Baathism, Nasserism, pan-Arabism, or Islamism—their respective states were in immediate danger of survival.

Arab leaders therefore had to pay lip service to Arab unification simply because doing otherwise would have come at a high personal price: King Abdullah of Jordan was assassinated in 1951 because of his political overture to Israel, and Iraq's Prime Minister Nuri as-Said died in the 1958 overthrow of the monarchy, as did Egypt's President Anwar Sadat in 1981. Betraying Arab nationalism was always punishable—this takeaway has remained with Arab leaders. In practice, however, these leaders torpedoed Arab unification projects. The list of failed attempts is considerable: The 1946 proposal of Jordan's King Abdul-

lah to unite Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan into Greater Syria; the Iraqi-Jordanian Federation, which collapsed with Iraq's coup of 1958; the 3-year United Arab Republic (comprising Syria and Egypt), which confederated with North Yemen in the United Arab States; the 1964 Unified Political Command of Iraq and Egypt, designed to prepare unification of the two states; the 1971 Federation of Arab Republics consisting of Libya, Egypt, and Sudan (later replaced by Syria); the 1975 talks between Jordan and Syria, and the 1978 talks between Iraq and Syria, supposedly geared toward integration; the 1977 attempt at a federation between Egypt, Sudan, and Syria; the 1974 Arab Islamic Republic, including Tunisia and Libya; and the 1989 Arab Cooperation Council, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and North Yemen. The most successful attempt has been, of course, the UAE, which was formed in 1971 by seven emirates.

There are several reasons these many attempts failed, but the main reason was that not all Arab states were ready to concede sovereignty to a supranational Arab entity. This became particularly visible during what came to be known as the Arab Cold War. Tensions between monarchies and revolutionary republics stalled inter-Arab relations from the 1950s to the 1960s, at least in part over the question of Arab leadership.<sup>6</sup> Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who gave pan-Arabism a new twist with Nasserism (essentially the idea that the Arab world should unify under Egypt's leadership), played a crucial role. Kingdoms such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Libya, and Morocco feared to be overthrown like the Hashemites in Iraq in 1958 and the monarchy in Egypt in 1952. Revolutionaries, such as Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Algeria, indeed pursued sometimes more, sometimes less, open

policies aimed at regime change and engaged in proxy wars such as in Yemen (Saudi Arabia and Egypt) or Western Sahara (Algeria and Morocco). In addition, unification efforts such as the one between Egypt and Syria ran into simple issues of bureaucracy, hierarchy, and decisionmaking procedures. Shortly before the war of 1967, Arab states therefore began to give up on the creation of one Arab superstate, instead accommodating a form of Arab nationalism in line with sovereignty.

The fact that the first Arab League summit was held almost 20 years after the organization's inception in 1964 exemplifies the long road Arab states had taken in regional matters. The summit, and the declarations that followed it, formally put an end to Arab unification efforts and established a new regional order based on individual states. It called on Arab states to cease their propaganda wars and to recognize the principle of noninterference—because without Arab unity, there would be no retaking of Palestine. Jordan and Saudi Arabia insisted that the Arab states had to put an end to jeopardizing each other's existence—in the case of Saudi Arabia, this was a hint at its confrontation with Egypt in the Northern Yemen civil war, where they both supported different sides. Sovereignty therefore became the main pillar on which the Arab fight against Israel was to be rested. The year 1964 was the date of birth not of the Arab region as such—it was born with pan-Arabism—but of the Arab **state** system.

It was also the year when Arab states began to develop a common position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—in fact, its first common position on foreign policy matters. The region's existence as a bloc and the sovereignty of Arab states became closely intertwined with the Palestinian question, which was the common

denominator. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded that year and, in 1967, the summit held in Khartoum issued the “Three Nos” declaration that laid out the Arab stand on the issue: “No peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel, no negotiations with it.” Although Arab summitry did not prove very effective in the resolution of this particular conflict, it was indeed the starting point of regional relations in the proper sense, and gave way to the emergence of territorial nationalism.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Arab State System: First Steps.**

However, the system underwent a series of shocks when several Arab states deviated from the common position—in particular with regard to the Palestinian question. Jordan’s cracking down on and expulsion of the PLO in 1970, its claim to the West Bank as part of Jordanian territory until 1988, Syria’s expansionist rhetoric (e.g., referring to Jordan as part of Syria), but especially Egypt’s peace treaty with Israel in 1979, undermined the system’s underpinnings severely.

Egypt’s membership in the Arab League was suspended and the League’s headquarters moved from Cairo to Tunis. Egypt was not the first Arab state to be ostracized for breaking ranks with its regional brothers: Iraq had been sidelined for its 1955 Baghdad Pact with Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and the UK, as was Jordan following rumors that it was about to sign a peace deal with Israel after the War of 1948. But Egypt’s departure from Arab politics tore a hole into the regional system in a way neither Jordan’s flirtations with Israel nor Iraq’s turn to the West had done.

In the 1980s, the region descended into fragmentation on several fronts: sub-regional bodies such as

the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) (1981, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and the UAE) and the Arab Maghreb Union (1989, consisting of Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia) began to form and to implicitly undermine the Arab League's comprehensive claim. Arab states disagreed on Iraq's war with Iran—Libya and Syria supported Iran, breaking ranks with Arabism once more. Lebanon's civil war, Israel's invasion of it, and the first Intifada in 1987 all went without a major Arab reaction. Instead, Arabs almost doubled the number of militarized conflicts among themselves from 10 between 1949 and 1967 to 19 between 1967 and 1989. Nevertheless, Arabism as the framework for regional interaction remained intact. Arab states continued to refer to themselves as such, and repeatedly sought the settlement of their conflicts through the Arab narrative of brotherhood—but they were not able to create a proper framework for regional interaction.

Following Iran's Islamic Revolution of 1979, pan-Islamism emerged as a powerful contender operating along the same lines as pan-Arabism: calling Arab states illegitimate and for the establishment of an Islamic state comprised of only Muslims, the movement became an immediate threat to all Arab states. The seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979, the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981, and the emergence of Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan were all preludes to the Islamization of the Palestinian file, the rise of the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria in 1989, and ultimately, the creation of al-Qaeda in 1996.<sup>8</sup> Although pan-Islamism and pan-Arabism are rival concepts, their rationale is the same: Arab states should be abolished and molded into one larger entity.



## **The 1990s: A Lost Arab Decade.**

Egypt returned to the League of Arab States in 1989, but it barely had time to retake its seat as the driver of Arab politics.<sup>9</sup> The next shock to the Arab state system, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, was barely a year away. The invasion and the U.S.-led coalition that restored Kuwaiti sovereignty fragmented the region even further. Not only did Saddam Hussein violate the 1964 principle of mutual recognition of sovereignty by laying claim to Kuwait (which had nominally been part of Iraq's Basra district until 1913), but worse, the Arab states proved incapable of liberating it themselves. At a League summit shortly after the invasion, 12 Arab states called for an unconditional withdrawal of Iraq, but Algeria and Yemen abstained; Jordan, the PLO, Sudan, and Mauritania expressed reservations; and Tunisia did not attend the summit. Arab ranks were split, but every delegation justified its position based on Arabism as all sought to avoid a Western invasion. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria became the main contributors to the international coalition. Two years later, Israel signed the Oslo Accords with the PLO, followed by a peace treaty with Jordan. Neither treaty brought a comprehensive peace, but Arab relations were damaged.

Jordan relinquished its claim to the West Bank only begrudgingly, and Syria felt left behind from a Grand Bargain that could have returned the Golan Heights (as did Lebanon, then still occupied in part by Israel); whereas a Palestinian faction, Hamas, emerged, which rejected the end of violent struggle against Israel. The year 1990 therefore threw Arabism into an even deeper crisis than in the 1980s. For the first time, ideas about an extended region, including non-Arab

states such as Turkey and Iran, emerged. Arabism lost traction even in terms of regional space definition; the Arab League ceased to meet at yearly summits, convening only twice in the 1990s. Outsiders, such as the United States, were allowed to open military bases in the Gulf, and coalitions with non-Arabs were no longer a taboo. The invasion of Iraq by another U.S.-led coalition in 2003 only repeated the 1990 experience to some extent; although the Arab League condemned the war (with the exception of Kuwait), several Arab states lent it overt or tacit support.

In the years leading up to the Arab Spring, the region had settled into a fossilized system comparable to Europe's 19th-century concert of nations—or perhaps to a balance of weakness: recognizing each other's sovereignty but incapable of further integration, Arabism continued to loom in the background as a merely cultural, but powerful force of unification. A common threat denominator in a potentially nuclear Iran united Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt to some extent—but not beyond conventional relations. Void of a regional vision, or indeed an engine for integration, the region continued to vegetate in parallel state existence rather than in interaction or indeed integration.

The Gulf region was (and still is) one of the least integrated in the world, and incidentally also one of those with the highest prevalence of conflict. In spite of a series of agreements pertaining to mutual defense pacts, common markets, and free movements of peoples, none of them have moved substantially into the implementation phase. Most Arab states impose visas on their respective nationals. In the Maghreb, regional trade does not exceed 2.9 percent of exports; in the Gulf, it stands at 2.2 percent.<sup>10</sup>

## Arab Relations and the Shock of 2011.

The events now termed the “Arab Spring” had a decidedly regional dimension to them in spite of their originally domestic character. What began in Tunisia in late-2010 spread first to Egypt and Yemen and later to Bahrain, Libya, and Syria. Demonstrations not only spilled over from one country to another (every Arab state, with the exception of Qatar, saw some form of protest)—but the satellite channel *Al Jazeera* seized the common linguistic and cultural space to promote the notion that these were not merely domestic phenomena, but indeed regional ones.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the Arab Spring had implications for inter-Arab relations for a number of reasons. Not only did it shake up a largely stale system as it changed the leadership in states that used to play crucial roles in the system; it also paralyzed others in regional terms without actually achieving regime change. Libya, Syria, and Egypt, traditionally self-declared drivers of Arab politics, became objects rather than subjects of regional relations (just as Iraq has since 1991). Their eclipse empowered those states that saw no disruptive protests and were therefore still in a position to not only react to, but also to shape, the regional changes—mainly located in the Gulf. Algeria and Morocco, which have remained equally stable, have not displayed the same ambition to influence the unfolding of regional events. The year 2011 can therefore be described as the year of strategic confusion—but also as the starting point for the Gulf States’ emergence as the driving force of Arab politics.

From passive witnesses, the Gulf States—in particular, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE—quickly turned to active influencers of the regional situation in

2011. While all three recognized the potentially destabilizing effect of serial regional change, they hedged their bets differently and reacted at different speeds. Qatar, which made itself an unequivocal supporter of all protests from the very beginning, conducted a consistent policy of interventionism in the years after the Arab Spring. The UAE moved between actively supporting regime change at the beginning while containing its most destabilizing effects, whereas Saudi Arabia developed an initially cautious but increasingly aggressive revisionist stance that was as consistent as Qatar's – but both policies were ultimately at a collision course with each other.

Inter-Arab relations therefore underwent three crucial phases following the Arab Spring: The first phase lasted from January to November 2011, when non-Arab Spring states assessed the situation and began to hedge their bets in a state of utter strategic uncertainty. In the second phase, lasting from December 2011 to July 2013, the arrival of Islamist forces in power in Egypt and Tunisia lent certainty to the picture and triggered more decided policies. In the third phase, which began in July 2013, the collision course between revolutionaries and revisionists became apparent and is still ongoing.

### **The First Phase: Out with the Old.**

When demonstrations began in Tunisia and later Egypt, the Gulf States seemed to stand by as mere protectors of former dictators: Saudi Arabia offered a safe haven to Tunisia's deposed President Ben Ali, as did the UAE to Egypt's President Hosni Mubarak (an offer he refused). Once toppled, Saudi Arabia voiced strong reservations about Mubarak's trial. Later, in

2011, it received Yemen's deposed President Abdullah Saleh for a short stay just as it had granted exile to Uganda's President Idi Amin.<sup>12</sup> The family of Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi settled later that year, first in Algeria and then Oman.

However, the Gulf States' mere bystanding attitude changed fairly quickly, when one of them, Bahrain, was directly affected by the wave of protests. By the beginning of March, the GCC emerged on the regional scene as a shaping force of events.

The GCC's first move was to set the course of action on the Libyan crisis by being the first regional organization calling for military action, including a no-fly zone. Qatar's foreign minister, who presented the GCC's resolution, described Qaddafi's regime as "illegitimate,"<sup>13</sup> touching on the Arab taboo of non-interference and respect for sovereignty. Animosity between Libya's ruler Qaddafi and the Gulf States certainly played a role in the swift condemnation of his unveiled threats against civilians; relations between the Gulf and Libya had been rocky ever since Qaddafi came to power in a coup in 1969. These rocky relations were, in part, the result of different ideologies—Qaddafi seeing himself as a revolutionary overthrowing anarchic feudal systems—and in part the result of divergent oil policies. Qaddafi supported the Dhofar rebellion aimed at the overthrow of the Sultanate of Oman, Iran against its war with Iraq, and Iraq during its occupation of Kuwait. In 2000, Libya recalled its ambassador from Doha in response to an *Al-Jazeera* program critical of the Libyan government.<sup>14</sup> When the uprising began in Benghazi, there was no love lost between Qaddafi and the Gulf States.

Not only that, but the GCC internationalized the crisis further by calling on the Arab League for ac-

tion. On Qatari impulse, the Arab foreign ministers suspended Libyan League membership and called on the United Nations (UN) to prevent military action by the Libyan regime the very next day. Although the call has been presented as a unanimous decision, several states did voice objections against military action: Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Algeria expressed concern over potentially destabilizing foreign intervention, and insisted on the exclusion of ground troops.<sup>15</sup>

Five days later, the UN Security Council validated the call with Resolution 1973. When military strikes began within a week of the GCC's original call, Qatar joined with six fighter jets and two transport aircraft, whereas the UAE provided 12 fighter jets.<sup>16</sup> They were not the only Arab countries supporting the operation, but they were the most active ones; Jordan supported with intelligence, whereas Morocco opened its airspace.

Qatar later openly admitted sending hundreds of troops on the ground in spite of an international consensus that the prohibition of foreign occupation troops, as stated in the Resolution, ruled out ground troops altogether.<sup>17</sup> It was the first Arab country to recognize the National Transition Council (NTC) as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people (a step the UAE took 3 months, and Saudi Arabia, 10 months later). But Qatar also assisted in selling one million barrels of Libyan oil on behalf of the rebels – for which it paid almost regular market rate – as a way to circumvent the international sanctions and help the NTC keep its staff on pay. Qatar also supplied the Libyan rebels with gas and diesel, provided weapons worth \$400 million, and supported the creation of a rebel satellite channel called *Libya likull Al-Ahrar* (*Libya for All the Free*), which started broadcasting from Doha with

the logistical and technical support of a smaller Qatari station, *Al-Rayyan*.<sup>18</sup> By October 2011, the GCC had achieved its objective: Libya's ruler Qaddafi, in power since 1969, had been removed.

While Saudi Arabia had second thoughts about military action in Libya, it did not hesitate to muster the GCC to quell the Bahraini uprising only 3 days after its resolution on Libya. Demonstrations in the capital, Manama, had turned violent throughout February when the Bahraini government requested GCC assistance to "secure Bahrain's vital and strategically important military infrastructure from any foreign interference."<sup>19</sup> The GCC deployed about 1,500 troops of its Peninsula Shield Force to Bahrain, about two-thirds from Saudi Arabia.

The move proved to be only the first Saudi attempt to shape the strategic shift in the region: in addition to its military action in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia simultaneously promised \$20 billion not only to Bahrain, but also to Oman in order to support both governments' efforts to tackle their protests. This attempt was particularly successful in Oman, where initial (and timid) attempts at reform were followed by a hard line against protestors.<sup>20</sup>

In a move of prevention, the GCC reached out to Morocco and Jordan, the only two Arab monarchies not located in the Gulf, and offered their support to prevent any efforts to topple their regimes. Although originally the idea of membership was floated at the GCC summit in May 2011, this somewhat ambitious proposal was later transformed into a strategic partnership and has since stalled altogether. Nevertheless, \$5 billion was made available for each country for development projects, and Saudi Arabia lifted its trade restrictions on Jordanian fruits and vegetables.<sup>21</sup>

Saudi Arabia also lent strong support to a brokered transition in neighboring Yemen, where an uprising had challenged President Saleh's regime since early-2011.<sup>22</sup> The GCC had reacted swiftly to the events by taking on a mediation role within a few weeks of the mass demonstrations, and managed to negotiate a deal between Yemen's political parties and the president within a few months. Yemen turned out to be the only negotiated regime change of the Arab Spring—perhaps precisely because neighboring Gulf interests were strong enough to lend assistance to the transition process.

But whereas the Gulf States agreed broadly on the course of action in Bahrain, Yemen, and Libya, they embarked on different policy courses in Egypt and Tunisia. These differences were marginal in the early phase, but would later materialize in a foreign policy clash. The provisional takeover of power of Egypt's Supreme Council of the Armed Forces was cautiously welcomed by Saudi Arabia, but overall, the kingdom did not approve of ousting a head of state by popular acclaim. Although Saudi Arabia promised \$4 billion in economic aid—in comparison, the United States provided only \$65 million to support the transition—it took almost 1 year for a mere quarter of that sum to actually arrive in Egypt's banks. Saudi Arabia's unease with the situation became somewhat visible when it publicly toyed with the idea of revoking visas for foreign workers—a measure that would hit Egypt hard not only because of its 2.5-million nationals working there, but also because their yearly remittances amount to \$19.2 billion.<sup>23</sup> Qatar's position toward the new situation in Egypt was more forthcoming; within a month of Mubarak's departure, it launched *Aljazeera Egypt*, and is suspected to have funded Islamist groups with \$2.5 million while the revolution was still ongoing.



Just when the regional situation seemed to have somewhat stabilized, Syria's demonstrations degenerated into full-scale violence in the summer of 2011. Qatar swiftly closed its Damascus embassy in July, a move its GCC colleagues followed in February 2012.<sup>24</sup> The Syrian National Council, the main body representing the opposition, formed in August that year. When violence continued unabated into the fall, the Arab League first proposed a peace plan and shortly thereafter suspended the country's membership upon strong Qatari lobbying. As in the case of Libya, the decision was not unanimous: Lebanon and Yemen voted against it, while Iraq abstained.<sup>25</sup>

The first phase of the regional reshuffling came to an end in November 2011: Libya had retaken its seat in the Arab League, with a new regime in place in August of that year. Yemen had embarked on a transitional road map, and both Tunisia and Egypt were heading for elections. With the exception of Qatar, those Arab states not affected by the Arab Spring had reacted with moderate support and caution to the events of early-2011. This stood in stark contrast to Iran, which claimed early on to be the inspiration of what it termed the "Islamic Spring." Into this brief moment of relief broke the first election results of both Tunisia and Egypt, which shook the regional relation system a second time.

## **Phase Two: In with the Islamists.**

Tunisia's elections to its constituent assembly were held in late-October 2011, and produced a landslide victory for the Muslim Brotherhood's Tunisian offshoot, Ennahda, with 37 percent of the votes. The Egyptian parliamentary elections equally saw a crush-

ing victory for Islamist parties from different branches. A third of the newly registered parties were Islamists; six of them gained seats in the assembly, but the large majority of votes (37.5 percent) went to the alliance led by the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party, and the Islamist Bloc led by the Salafi Nour Party (27.8 percent).

Both events led to concern in some of the Arab states—most notably in Saudi Arabia. Although Riyadh had offered a home to Muslim Brotherhood members banned elsewhere in the region, the organization's potential alliance with Iran and ideological rivalry with Saudi Salafism worried the Gulf kingdom. Tensions were rife in no time: Saudi Arabia closed its Cairo embassy in early-2012 after protests over its detention of an Egyptian human rights lawyer, a dramatic gesture even though the embassy remained closed only for a few days.<sup>26</sup> Saudi Arabia also began to counter actively Qatar's financial support to the Brotherhood government with support to Salafi parties such as Nour.<sup>27</sup>

The tone sharpened in March 2012, when the Emirates threatened to arrest a Qatar-based Egyptian cleric affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. The cleric, Sheikh Qaradawi, had criticized the UAE for cracking down on a gathering of Syrian opposition members in front of the Syrian embassy in Abu Dhabi. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood retaliated with a strong message, in turn condemned by the GCC secretary.<sup>28</sup>

But things grew even more hostile after the election of Muslim Brotherhood member Mohammed Morsi to Egypt's Presidency in June 2012 with 51.7 percent of the votes. Although Morsi's first visit in his presidential capacity was to Saudi Arabia, relations between the two countries remained strained.<sup>29</sup> His

calls for Islamic unity and his visit to Iran a month later were seen as threats by Riyadh. There had not been any diplomatic contacts between Cairo and Teheran since 1979, when relations were broken off because of Egypt's peace treaty with Israel.<sup>30</sup>

Although the Emirates originally reached out to Morsi, inviting him for a state visit to Abu Dhabi, they nevertheless soon joined Saudi Arabia in an increasingly anti-Brotherhood and therefore anti-Egyptian attitude; the Emirates arrested 80 alleged Brotherhood members, accusing them of plotting regime overthrow.<sup>31</sup> In March 2013, a Kuwaiti MP proposed to rename Hassan al-Banna (the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) Street in Kuwait City, arguing that "the latest developments have indicated that the Muslim Brotherhood is a threat to the security of Kuwait and its fellow GCC member states."<sup>32</sup>

Egypt's strongest regional ally in Phase Two was Qatar, not only in financial, but also in political terms. Doha supported the Muslim Brotherhood, which was in power, and was the only Gulf state to do so. Morsi visited Qatar shortly after his visit to Saudi Arabia and received a pledge of \$2 billion to support Egypt's flailing economy.<sup>33</sup> A few weeks later, Qatar announced major investment projects in Egypt amounting to \$18 billion, including tourism, energy, and industry. This was a new development, as Qatar had not been a major investor in Egypt before 2011; in spring 2012, the Qatar National Bank announced a 5-year plan to "make itself an 'icon' in the Middle East and Africa by expanding and diversifying income sources."<sup>34</sup> Qatar acquired the majority of shares of the Egyptian branch of the French bank, *Société Générale*, for nearly \$2 billion, whereas its investment bank, QInvest, sought to take over a controlling share in Egypt's largest invest-

ment bank, EFG-Hermes, but failed to receive approval from the Egyptian Financial Supervisory Authority.<sup>35</sup> In early-2013, Doha announced its plan to double its financial aid to the Egyptian government with a new injection of \$2.5 billion, and added an additional \$3 billion 3 months later.<sup>36</sup>

Qatar was also active in the Syrian crisis, which continued to deteriorate throughout 2012. Hamas (the Palestinian spin-off of the Muslim Brotherhood, whose headquarters had been in Damascus) moved to Doha in early-2012. This was a diplomatic coup against Syria.<sup>37</sup> When an Arab League observer mission was obstructed in its work by the Syrian regime, the GCC withdrew its monitors from the mission in early-2012, and Qatar pushed early on for the recognition of the Syrian opposition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people.<sup>38</sup>

In March 2012, the League appointed Kofi Annan (later Lakhdar Brahimi) as joint special envoy along with the UN to find a peaceful solution to the crisis. Around that time, Qatar declared its intention to arm Syrian rebels, and was later joined by Saudi Arabia. Although the two Gulf States agreed on the removal of Bashar Al-Assad's regime, they did not see eye to eye on how to achieve this. Whereas Riyadh was always suspicious of Islamist rebel groups, Doha pushed for a rapid victory no matter what. Although exact numbers are difficult to obtain, Qatar is suspected to have supported the Syrian rebels with \$3 billion in the first 2 years of the conflict alone.<sup>39</sup>

When Syria's opposition body proved dysfunctional, it was absorbed into a new body – the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces – founded in Doha in late-2012. Recognized immediately by the GCC and several Western states,

the Coalition was later rumored to take Syria's seat at the Arab League; instead, the League allowed its representatives to attend ministerial meetings on an exceptional basis. Egypt, Algeria, Lebanon, and Iraq in particular argued that it was not a sovereign state.<sup>40</sup>

By the summer of 2013, the situation across the region had turned from collective enthusiasm in some places to collective instability. Libya began to descend progressively into chaos amidst militia violence, culminating in a siege on the parliament and several ministries. Qatar had lost ground there in 2012 when it was rumored to fund Islamist groups. In Tripoli, demonstrators gathered to burn dolls in traditional Qatari clothing, chanting "No to Qatar's agenda; Libya is a free and independent state."<sup>41</sup>

In Tunisia, the assassination of secular politician Chokri Belaid in February 2013 threw the country into a profound political crisis, which was further exacerbated by the assassination of politician Mohammed Brahmi in July. Both killings were linked to Salafi Islamist groups, which had begun to rise in the country in the months after the revolution. Both Kuwait and the UAE exerted significant pressure on Ennahda to relinquish power, including the threat of withholding financial aid. Algeria, usually more subtle when it comes to interference in other countries' affairs, threatened to suspend cooperation with Tunisia in economic and security matters if the government did not strike a consensual deal.

In Egypt, a political power struggle between the judiciary and the new regime led first to an annulment of the parliamentary elections of 2011 and later to a constitutional decree in which President Morsi granted himself almost absolute powers. Opposition against his rule began to form not only in the armed

forces, but also on the streets of Cairo: Tamarod, a rebel movement formed in April 2013, started gathering signatures calling for Morsi's resignation. Mass demonstrations paralyzed the country and worsened an already dire economic situation.

Shortly before Phase Two came to an end in July, Qatar's Emir Hamad abdicated in favor of his son, Tamim. But this did not fundamentally change Qatar's foreign policy stance.

### **The Third Phase: The Old System Strikes Back.**

The regional system received a third blow when the Egyptian armed forces decided to remove President Morsi from power on July 3, 2013.<sup>42</sup> In an unprecedented cycle of violence, supporters and opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood clashed throughout the month, ultimately resulting in mass arrests and several thousand casualties.<sup>43</sup> The regime change in Egypt had immediate regional consequences, since it swiftly aligned opponents of the Islamists' political project.

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Kuwait were particularly quick to endorse the new situation in Egypt (the only Arab state to condemn it was Tunisia); King Abdullah congratulated Interim President Adly Mansour the very same day he was appointed, and praised the armed forces explicitly:

We strongly shake hands with the men of all the armed forces, represented by General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi, who managed to save Egypt at this critical moment from a dark tunnel. God only could apprehend its dimensions and repercussions.<sup>44</sup>

UAE foreign minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed declared that, "The great Egyptian army proves, once

again, that it is the strong shield and the protector that guarantees that the country is a land of institutions and law that embraces all the components of the Egyptian people.”<sup>44a</sup> His words were echoed by Kuwait’s ruler, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who congratulated Mansour and praised the military for its “positive and historic role.”<sup>45</sup>

Kuwait also moved to freeze assets of Muslim Brotherhood members and cracked down on pro-Morsi demonstrations in Kuwait City, deporting several Egyptians. All three states pledged urgent aid packages to support Egypt: Kuwait, \$4 billion; Saudi Arabia, \$5 billion; and the UAE, \$2.9 billion.<sup>46</sup> The three Gulf States continued in that vein throughout 2014: In February, Kuwait took a pro-Morsi satellite channel based in Beirut off air;<sup>47</sup> the following month, Muslim Brotherhood members, including a former Egyptian member of parliament, were arrested in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In September, Saudi Arabia opened its largest embassy to date in Cairo.<sup>48</sup>

Meanwhile, Qatar’s situation became more delicate; although the country had issued a tightlipped declaration in which it expressed respect for the will of the Egyptian people, it soon came under fire not only from the new regime in Cairo, but also from its neighbors. In December, Egypt declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, a move Saudi Arabia and the UAE followed 3 months later. With this declaration, Qatar’s alliance with the Brotherhood had suddenly been criminalized.

When Morsi was indicted 2 months after his removal, conspiracy with Qatar and Iran, as well as leaking top secret information to Doha, were among the charges.<sup>49</sup> *Aljazeera* journalists became default representatives of Qatar and were put on trial for crimes

-ranging from aiding terrorists to falsifying news.<sup>50</sup> Egyptian national television began to broadcast sports events for which *Aljazeera* held the rights, defiantly declaring that “We will not observe the rights of *Aljazeera* or abide by any judiciary provisions issued in its favor, since it has not respected the decision of the Egyptian judiciary system and continued the activities of *Aljazeera Live Egypt* in Egypt.”<sup>51</sup> Within months of the toppling, Egypt returned the \$2 billion in aid Qatar had sent during Morsi’s rule, refused a Qatar Airways’ request for permission to increase the number of flights between Doha and Cairo, and froze talks about Qatari gas deliveries.<sup>52</sup>

But Qatar’s problems soon moved from the bilateral to the multilateral level; in March 2014, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha, accusing Qatar of interference in the affairs of other states.<sup>53</sup> While this was only a veiled hint at Qatar’s support to the Muslim Brotherhood (members of which had taken refuge in Doha after their ban elsewhere), it included also the activities of *Aljazeera*. Saudi Arabia requested the shutdown of the TV stations as well as that of two think tanks based in Doha.<sup>54</sup>

But while Qatar did not move on the question of its TV station or indeed the research centers, it eventually did request the representatives of the Muslim Brotherhood to leave,<sup>55</sup> opening the way for reconciliation with its three neighbors. The Riyadh Agreement, which lays the groundwork for reconciliation, aligns the foreign policy of the Gulf States, but this was still unimplemented at the time of this writing.<sup>56</sup> Qatar’s neighbors remained distrustful of Doha’s willingness to end its support to the Muslim Brotherhood as well as its ideological spin-offs.



The regional sea change had a profound impact on Tunisia's Islamists in power; amidst fears of an Egyptian scenario and increasingly radical Salafists, Ennahda agreed to a technocratic government and the accelerated adoption of a new constitution. Ennahda's decision to tone down its claim to power certainly facilitated Tunisia's transition, but effectively reduced its impact. The regional geopolitical changes set in motion in Tunisia in late-2010 have therefore culminated in a powerful pushback by those powers that feel threatened by Islamism as an electoral force. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt are leading this alliance, but are supported quietly by Algeria.

The dilemma the region faces now is not only a power struggle pitting revolutionaries against reactionaries, but one that also touches on the sacrosanct notion that Arab states do not interfere in each other's matters. This becomes particularly clear when looking at Algeria's currently awkward position.

Although the Algerian regime traditionally supports revolutionary change, 2011 and its aftermath have challenged its foreign policy principles, which usually revolve around sovereignty and noninterference. While Algeria had great reservations about the international involvement in Libya, its attitude toward Islamists has led to a foreign policy inconsistency.

While Algeria's Libya position is, in part, informed by its noninterference principles, security considerations play a role too—and now challenge the notion of sovereignty as a cornerstone of foreign policy. Libya's security vacuum and Tunisia's Islamist challenge in the shape of Ansar Al-Sharia remind Algiers of its dark decade: Algeria's own democratic experience brought Islamists to power in the 1990s, leading to a coup in 1992, and ultimately a violent civil war lasting

a decade. Algeria has therefore watched the arrival of Islamist parties in power in Egypt and Tunisia with great concern – and the return of the military to power in Cairo with some relief. Ultimately, the fear of both Islamist terrorism and Islamists in power has trumped foreign policy principles. Now Algeria has deployed several thousand troops on its border with Tunisia and Libya, signed a security cooperation agreement with Tunis, and has remained remarkably silent on the bombing of Islamist positions in Syria, Libya, and Iraq.<sup>57</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Although the Arab Spring began as a domestic affair, it has now created a strategic shift in a region that had been fossilized for several decades. Paralyzing some foreign policy actors while empowering others, the events of 2011 have led to a “Gulf Moment” in Arab relations – more importantly, the rift among Gulf States concerning the implications of 2011 are being felt across the region. The antagonism between Islamist forces and Qatar on the one hand, and reactionary forces, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE on the other, has had ripple effects that can be felt in Libya, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Egypt.

The driving force behind Arab relations has therefore relocated from Cairo, where it was situated for the better part of the 20th century, to the Gulf. It is safe to say that inter-Arab relations will be shaped by the Gulf States in one way or the other. However, Gulf leadership in Arab affairs is not uncontested: to begin with, Qatar has still not recognized Saudi leadership in a series of matters, and continues to claim a geopolitical role some deem too big for its size. Elsewhere in

the region, traditional middle powers such as Egypt, Iraq, and Syria are likely to stage a comeback at some point and will seek to destabilize a system currently orbiting around the Gulf. That notwithstanding, the Arab Spring has shaken inter-Arab relations to the point of no return – and perhaps created at last a setup that will ultimately lead to more stability.

All of this destabilizing reshuffling occurs, however, in a context of increased insecurity; Arab states, in particularly in the Gulf, are now spending alarming numbers on defense and adopting more and more aggressive stances toward Iran. The emergence of terrorist groups throughout the region, more powerful than al-Qaeda ever was, means that once again, the region is a source of instability for Western powers – not only because of geographic proximity to America's North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Allies or dependence on Arab oil, but also because of the potential disruption of trade routes crucial to world trade.

Outsiders who wish to engage with the region as a whole will not be able to circumvent the Gulf, be it as a regional body or, indeed, as individual Gulf States. The emergence of a bold and ambitious Gulf regional policy has implications not only in financial terms (Gulf States' aid easily trumps American or European contributions), but also in ideological ones. Regional projects will, at least in part, now be driven from the Gulf.

Cooperation with the right powers is therefore not only a matter of choice, but crucial. This cooperation will have to focus on outcomes rather than choose political sides, and seek the continuous reform of capable and professional forces able to tackle these security challenges with little or no American assistance. This cooperation will also have to recognize the fact that, as the dust settles over a region in turmoil, the emerging

powers are no longer receivers of foreign policy objectives, but also have an agenda of their own – and the political and military muscle to implement it.

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